Rafael de Soto

ARTWORK

Compiled by DjF du Marais

Rafael Maria de Soto y Hernandez was born February 18, 1904 in Aguadilla, Puerto Rico. His parents were Milagros and Domingo DeSoto, a noble Spanish banking family descended from the famous conquistador, Hernando de Soto. There were seven children in the family. Rafael was the third born.

In 1915 the family was devastated by a financial crisis and the father died of a heart attack. Eleven-year-old Rafael was sent to St. Joseph's Seminary in San Juan, where he was trained to be a priest.

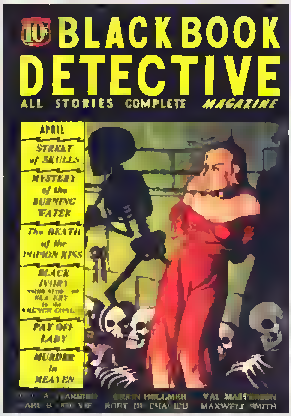
His natural artistic talent was noticed by Father Noel, who sent Rafael to private art lessons with a local artist, Diaz McKenna.

After completing his education at St Joseph's, Rafeal decided to become an artist rather than go to Rome to complete his religious training. "I liked girls too much!"

In 1923 at age nineteen he moved to New York City to live with an uncle, who was a tailor on the Lower East Side. With only a schoolbook command of English, he found work at an advertising company.

Thrilling Detective - 1934

Western Romances - 1934



Black Book Detective - 1935

Black Book Detective, pulp cover - August 1934

This one of only several known surviving early paintings of De Soto's finest artistic Art Deco period. It is believed this painting hung on display in Coney Island's famous House of Horrors attraction. The Infa[illegible] "Yellow Peril" theme is an extremely rare [illegible] especially from this prime period.

In 1930 he began to draw interior story illustrations for Street & Smith's western pulp magazines.

In 1932 he began to sell freelance cover paintings to pulp magazines, such as Detective Book, Five-Novels Monthly, Top-Notch, War Stories, Western Story, and Wild West Weekly.

He met Frances Mason, a model and a seamstress who worked at Bergdorf Goodman's. They dated for six years. In 1939 they married and moved to 4330 Forty-Sixth Street in Sunnyside, Queens.

He sold freelance pulp covers to Ace G-Man Stories, Ace Sports, All Detective, Black Book Detective, Champion Sports, Dime Detective, Dime Mystery, Phantom Detective, Popular Detective, The Spider, Ten Detective Aces, Terror Tales, Thrilling Detective, Western Aces, and Western Trails.

The pulp artist, Richard Lillis, was DeSoto's closest protege, a helpful model, and even a studio assistant. In 1941 DeSoto discovered Gloria Stoll, a seventeen-year-old discouraged highschool graduate art student that lived in his apartment building, and inspired her to be a commercial illustrator. She went on to a significant career as a pulp artist and later an abstract painter.

Circumstantial evidence from Gloria Stoll strongly suggests that DeSoto produced several pulp covers for publishers other than Popular Publications under the pseudonym, Irene Endris, who was actually DeSoto's tax accountant.

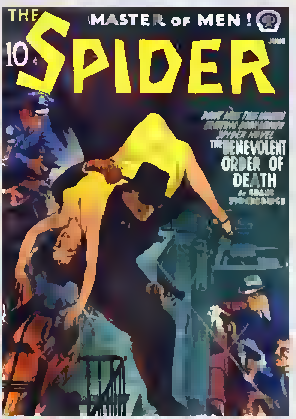
Terror Tales - 1937

Thrilling Mystery - 1937

Phantom Detective - 1938

Thrilling Mystery - 1940

Terror Tales - 1940



The Spider - 1941

In 1942 when he reported for the physical exam for his WWII enlistment he was discovered to have Type-2 diabetes and was classified as 4-F. He was among the few professional pulp artists to remain fully active during the war years.

In 1944 he and Frances moved to East Patchogue, NY, on Long Island. They had no children. In 1946 Frances DeSoto died from cancer.

He produced pulp covers up until the demise of the industry in the 1950s, for such magazines as Adventure, Argosy, Black Mask, Captain Zero, Crack Detective, Fantastic Novels, 15-Story Detective, Fifteen Western Tales, New Detective, Smashing Detective, and Walt Coburn's Western Magazine.

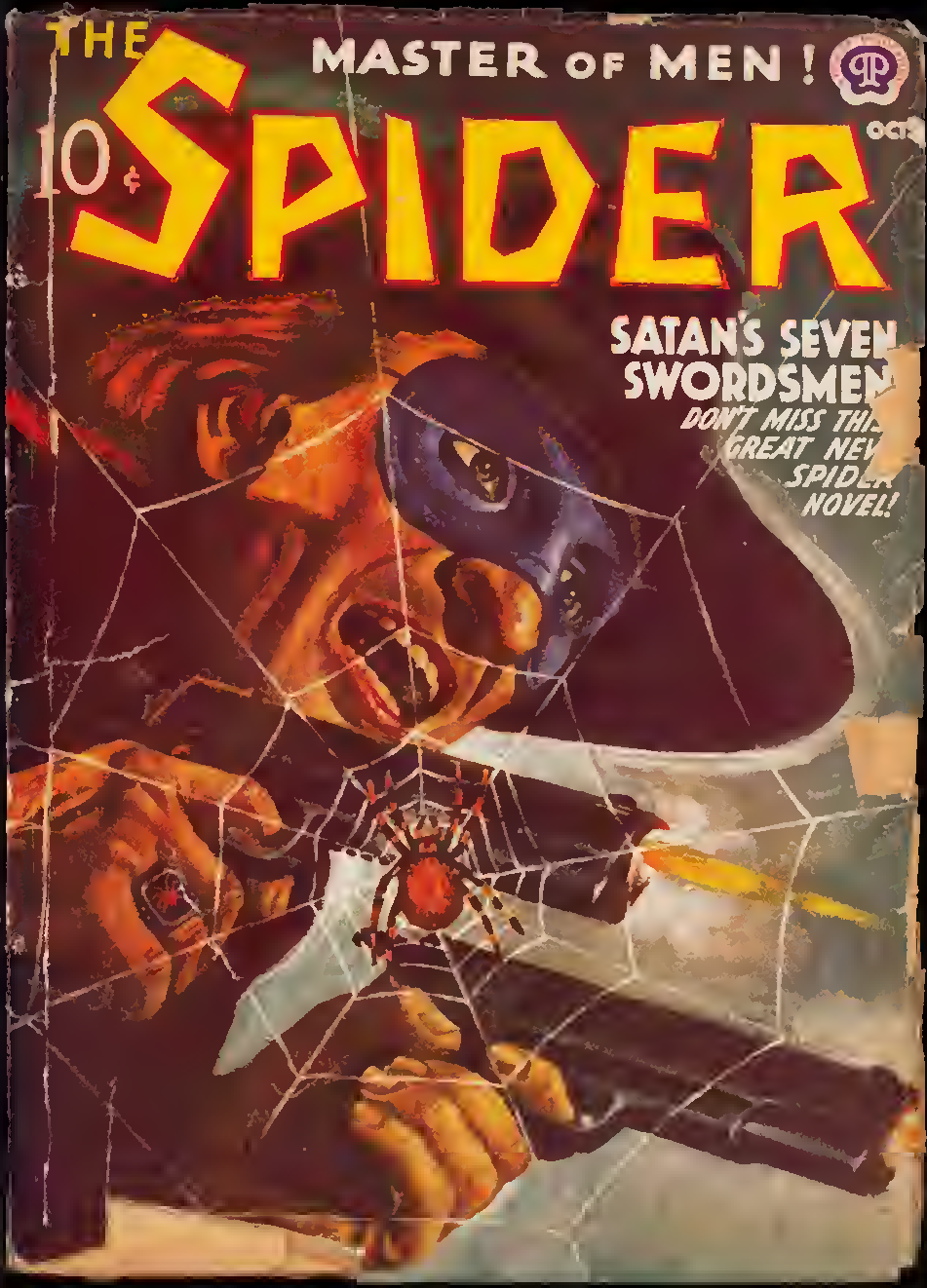
He also sold freelance illustrations to slick magazines, such as Argosy, Colliers, Coronet, Ladies Home Journal, The Journal American, Liberty, Redbook, and The Saturday Evening Post.

In the 1950s he also produced many paperback book covers for Ace, Bantam, Dell, Lion, Signet, and Pocket Books, including the iconic "H Is For Heroine" for Popular Library.

He met a local model on Long Island, Audrey Skaare, and they were married in 1951, and raised four children, Rafael, John, Maria, and Lisa.

He also painted many covers and interior story illustrations for men's adventure magazines, such as Action For Men, Adventure, Battle Cry, For Men Only, and True Adventure.

T. DeSato



Satan's Seven Swordsmen, The Spider cover illustration · October 1941

The Spider #100, Death and the Spider! - January 1942

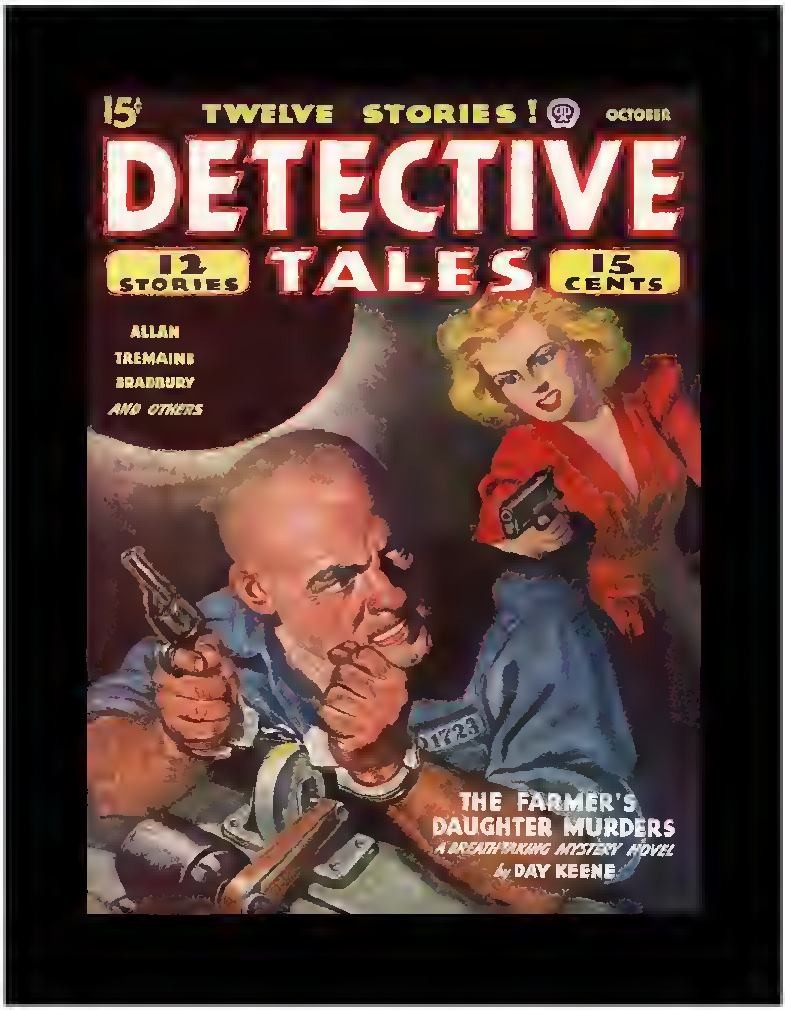
Recreation of the cover

Man with gun, silencing frightened woman, shadow of hanged man (cover illus. for Black Mask by Robert Reeves) - 1942

The Spider - 1942

Detective Tales, pulp cover - July 1944

Attributed to RAFAEL DE SOTO - Detective Magazine cover illustration - November 1945

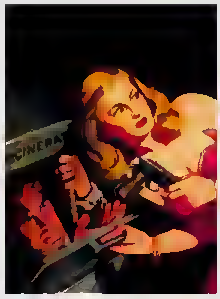


Detective Tales—1944

Title She s Too Dead for Me! Thoughts Rafael de Soto She's Too Dead for Me! New Detective Magazine - July 1946

Dime Detective pulp cover - June 1947

In 1964 Desoto retired from freelance illustration and began teaching art at State University of New York (SUNY), Farmingdale, where he worked for ten years. He enjoyed teaching so much that he continued to hold private evening art classes in his studio for the rest of his life, along with a constant demand for his commissioned portraits.



Burn, baby burn Softly Creep and Softly Kill (Detective Tales) August 1947

According to the artist, "I love painting. It's not only because I like to paint and I have spent my whole life doing it, but I recommend it for everyone. When you are painting you forget all of your troubles.

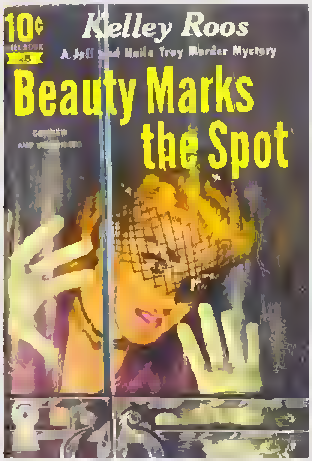
Your brain can only concentrate on one thing at a time, and when you are concentrating on that painting, you forget everything else! That's good therapy! I am still looking forward to doing the most interesting painting I have ever made. I have some more to do. I'll be going after it until I die."

Rafael DeSoto died of pneumonia in a Long Island hospital at age 88 on December 24, 1992.

Detective Tales "Eyes Behind the Door" - 1947

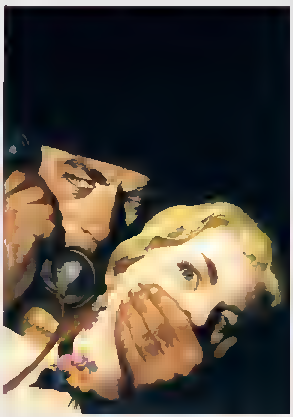
New Detective, pulp cover - January 1948

Blood on My Doorstep-New Detective Magazine July 1949



Beauty Marks the Spot (Jeff and Haila Troy Murder Mystery) (Dell 10 cent Book 28) AUTHOR Kelley Roos - 1948

Paperback Ace 1953



New Detective - 1951

Pulp cover concept preliminary illustration

Elinda (The Satellite), paperback cover - 1951

951

NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY SIGNET BOOKS

She Knew All the Tricks—and Used Them

Elinda

(THE SATELLITE)

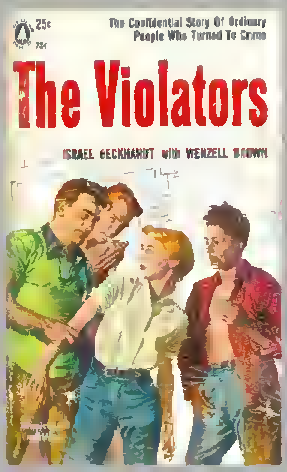
Frances Clippinger

A SIGNET BOOK

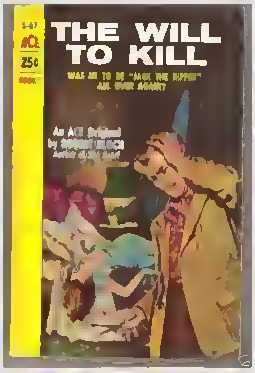
Complete and Unabridged

H IS FOR HEROIN
David Hulburd
paperback 1953

Pick-up, paperback digest cover - 1953



Violators The (Popular 734) AUTHOR Israel Beckhardt, Wenzell Brown 1956



ROBERT BLOCH The Will To Kill 1954

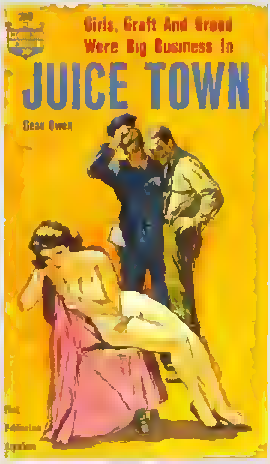
Men In Adventure 1959 07 July

Ten Roads to Hell by Robert Travers (Popular Library 618) - 1954

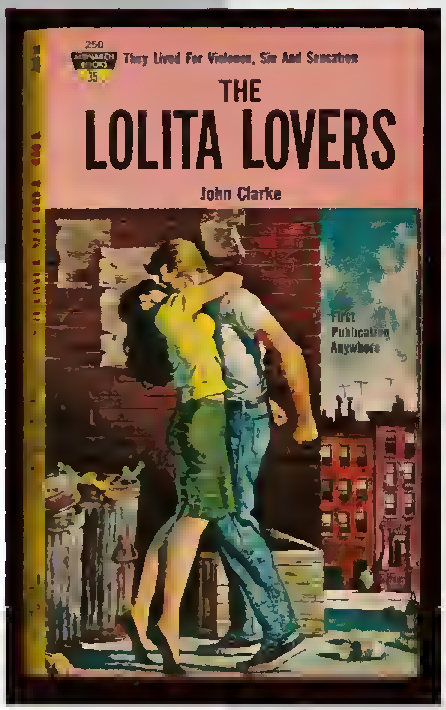
Love Slaves to the Beasts of Torture, Battle Cry cover - November 1960

FOR MEN ONLY Are YOU Afraid to Love? Read "SEX AND YOUR HEART"
Adventure
"THE PIEDMONT HARLOTS"
"KILLER WOLF OF THE NORTH"
OFF LIMITS

Adventure 1963



Juice Town By Dean Owen (Monarch 290) - 1962



The Lolita Lovers 1962

Rafael M. deSoto
P. O. Box 81
East Patchogue, N. Y. 11772
Tel. 516-475-1502

September 1st. 1981

Mr. Harry Mateteky,
Partner Magazine,
211 East 43rd. St.,
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Mr. Mateteky:

After my return from a vacation in Puerto Rico I found your letter in my accumulated mail.

Too bad I was not explained exactly the style of painting you wanted for Buck Rogers. Being a painter, I never thought you would want a line drawing style. Had I known, I would have worked the sketch in that manner.

Enclosed is a 35mm of a Spider cover done around the early or middle 1940. It was in a bad shape but I touched it up and looks like new. The only part I left alone was the Highlite yesso board in which it is painted. They stop making thie pannels ever since.

I own another Spider and I doubt anyone else has another one with my signature on it. Most of them were burnt in the storage fire.

I expect to place this one for sale at the next pulp convention in Conn. However if you are interested let me know soon.

Sincerely,

Rafael

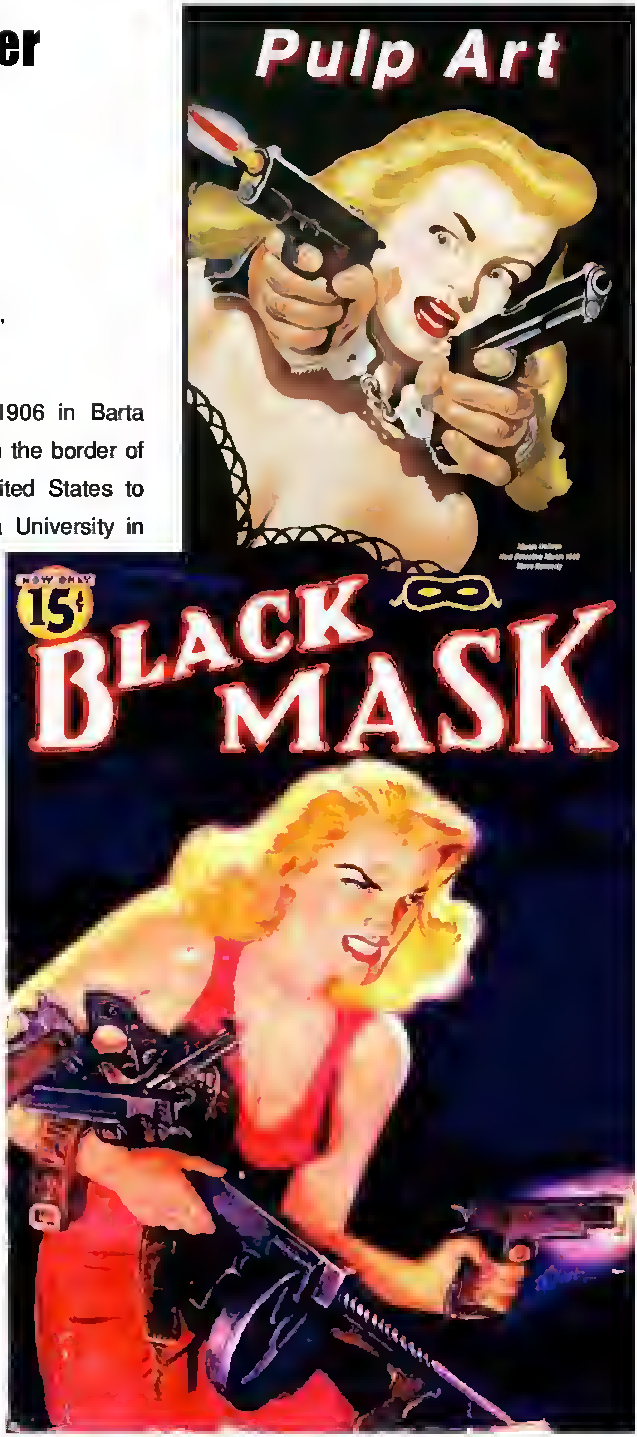
From Rafael De Soto to Harry Mateteky about the painting Satan

About Our Cover

A Black Mask

Exclusive!

Keith Alen Deutsch interviews **Rafael DeSoto,**
one of the great pulp cover artists of all time



Rafael DeSoto was born in 1906 in Barta Rolta, a small town in Spain on the border of Portugal. He came to the United States to study architecture at Columbia University in New York.

The depression forced him to quit school and support himself by drawing. He studied anatomy under George Bridgeman at the Arts Students League and eventually went to Pratt Institute and higher degrees.

But Mr. DeSoto will tell you that he picked up his real training in his first two years as a dry brush illustrator for Street and Smith's western, mystery and adventure pulps.

By 1934 he had done his first magazine cover for one of their "less advanced" pulps, Top notch. He was soon Street and Smith's most versatile cover illustrator, doing covers for Western Stories, Doc Savage, The Shadow - in time over two hundred other titles.

Because he could work more than twice as fast as anyone else in the business (he could knock out two to three covers a week) and because he was an innovative illustrator in demand by every publisher, Mr DeSoto holds the record for doing covers in the 30's and 40's

In time, Popular Publications, one of the great pulp publishing houses and the publishers of Black Mask in the 40's, dominated his time. But n one owned him.

He did covers for Argosy, Adventure, Cosmopolitan, Redbook, and The Saturday Evening Post. In the fifties he worked for the paperback houses. "All of 'em," he tells us, including Dell, Ace, Signet.

Rafael DeSoto also did some notable advertising work. He did a series of illustrations for the first Frigidaire campaign. He also did White Owl and Canadian Club advertisements.

Mr. DeSoto, who now teaches anatomy and composition at Farmingdale College on Long Island, feels that the magazine illustration of the pulp era is as close as commercial work has ever come to a fine art in America.

"In the old days everything was done for impact," he said. "Nowadays it's all design. The old drawings that jump off the page at you, the illustrated initials, the fine line work-that is an art that is almost lost and I wish that they would revive it."

We here at Bleck Mesk ere reviving it. Thie ie the first interview Mr. DeSoto haa granted to the press. Usually he lets his covers speak for themselves.

Bleck Mesk: Were you reading the pulps? What made you try out for them? For westerns?

DeSoto: I used to see them on the stands. Constantly. There seemed to be hundreds of them. And naturally I used to buy them. They were fascinating. I read them. And soon enough I pursued them. It was the depression. I had never done any work. Somehow I prepared a quick western for a sample and went to good old Street and Smith. The Art Director was Mr. James. The assistant Art Director was Harry Laury.

When I was in the waiting room and looked at all the beautiful paintings hanging around I got cold feet. When my time for an interview came I left my painting outside, I wouldn't show it be cause I knew how bad it was.

So the inevitable happens and the Art Director says, 'I can't give you any work until I see something you've done ' So I went back out and brought my painting in to him. He looked at it awhile and said; "You know, this is the most Spanish cowboy I ever saw.'

So I went to the library and I studied about Western life. About heels and boots and chaps and ten gallon hats and six gun holsters and so forth. I will say the second drawing I made was a little better. He hired me to do dry brush Illustrations. Dry brush is when you get your brush filled up with ink, but you dry it up a little and work with it. You can get very fine lines and sometimes double lines as you go along. You get very nice effects It's not used too much nowadays.

So he started me on dry brush drawings and I learned more doing those things than at any point in my career. I learned about composing a story. I learned about composition

After a while they became easy. It was those two years that prepared me for my later illustration. After those first years I got so busy doing covers I had much more work than I could do."

Deutsch: When did you start doing Black Mask covers?

DeSoto: Well I wasn't doing them at first. That was the top magazine. First I did mostly Street and Smith titles. I did The Shadow. After I started on the important magazines, I always thought that I should do something different with Black Mask. To make it stand out. So I decided to work with very dark backgrounds. So I decided to put jet black backgrounds around the shadows right into the black. Only the light part would show.

When I brought the first one into Mr. Steeger, the publisher of Popular Publications, he hit the top. 'Golly, that's good.' he said. That's what I want.'

Naturally I had reduced the whole scene into a close up because it is hard to work, to get too many things into the backgrounds. I think they were very effective.

Harry Steeger knew what he wanted. If he liked something, he bought it. If not you couldn't sell it to him.

It really brings back memories. I had a lot of fun doing those things

Now Terrell, who was the editor of Bleck Mask at that time, always thought that I was a little meek about drawing the gun. He'd tell me, 'The gun is very important. Make it look big. Make it look like a cannon, And give it some flesh contact between the villain and the girl. Not exactly hurting her. Maybe his hand across her mouth. Some physical contact to show that the girl is in danger. Without being hurt. She's not screaming because she's hurt, but because she's scared.' And I played on those things.

Deutsch: How did you meet Mr. Steeger?

DeSoto: I just went there. He was the publisher. He either liked it or he didn't. I approached the Art Director and he brought me to the editors and the publisher. The very first example I brought to Popular Publications they bought. Left me without a sample. Before I went to Popular I was working for Dell doing western and detective covers.

Street and Smith bought my first cover for $60. I remember I would get up early in the morning to go out and see if my cover was on the stands yet. In a short time my price was up to $150 and then $250.

I could do two or more a week. Pulps were very much in demand, very much in style. With no TV you had to read then. Every month Mr. Steeger called me in and told me I shouldn't do anybody else's covers. Four years after Street and Smith had started me I was straight Popular, I worked for them for 10 years. But he couldn't stop me from doing whatever titles I wanted to do outside."

Deutsch: What about horror covers? I noticed among the many cover paintings you showed me one with a Mummy in it. Popular Publications had quite a few horror titles. Did you work any of them?

DeSoto: Yes, of course. I have one in my studio of a man that was half metal and half flesh. And nobody could shoot him down. I still have the cover. His arm and one of his eyes and part of his face is metal."

Deutsch: Did they tell you to use girls with most of their clothing missing for the horror titles?

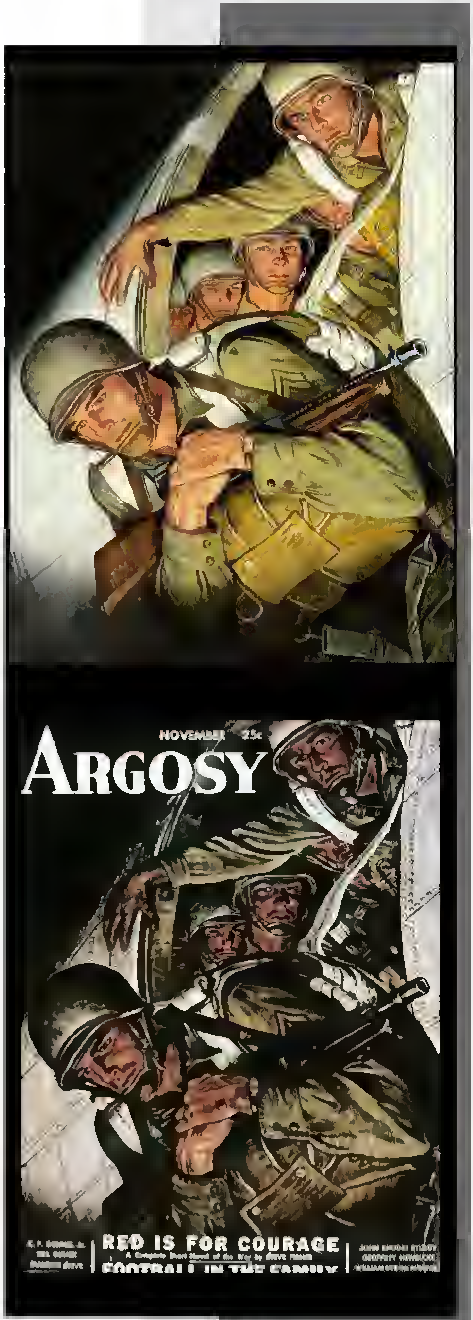
DeSoto: Ah, yes. Even in detective covers they would tell me to reveal as much as possible. I don't know how they published some of them. I used to rip them up, you know. Show half the breast. The legs. Just enough to cover what you couldn't show. Yes, I was told.

One time I did this spicy detective cover, I was told to show a lot of leg, so I decided to show a woman sitting down and putting her stockings on. I did a rough sketch and thought I really had it. I ended up showing it to Mr. Steeger and he wouldn't have it. It is not what you've exposed,' he said to me. 'You could even reveal more thigh. You've drawn it wrong. That's all. Looks like she's taking her stockings off. Can't have that. Study someone putting 'em on. It is ok if the lady is almost naked if she's putting her clothes on. But it's no good, even if she's hardly removed anything, to show a woman getting undressed on a cover. Sure enough, I had my wife practice taking her stockings off and there was a difference. I redid the painting and Mr. Steeger loved it.

There was a lot of censorship in those days, but there were rules like that and an awful lot of pretty raw stuff went through. And when pocketbooks first started in the early 40's, well most of that stuff was even stronger. I didn't even read the books after I did a few. All you had to do was show a half-naked woman and a bed. That was a whole other era."

Deutsch: What about the demise of the pulps?

DeSoto: I saw the writing on the wall in the early 40's. There was the war, a paper shortage, but most of all it was the pocketbooks.



So I went into pocketbooks, I did a slew of them in the 40's and 50's. Until 10 years ago I was still doing 'em. And I also did a lot of work for Magazine Management after the pulps died. After the war most pulp artists went to the men's adventure books like STAG and MENS. Adventure and war stories. I used to do both the covers and the inside illustrations. Duotones, mostly blues. The men's books never used straight line drawings,"

Deutsch: This is the age of pocketbooks. The most exciting area of publishing today.

DeSoto: Yes. I agree. They try everything now.

Deutsch: You don't see many line drawings nowadays though, do you?

DeSoto: Well pocketbooks didn't have them to begin with.

Deutsch: Do you think that's a mistake?

DeSoto: Yes. Very much.

Deutsch: Some pocketbooks do have illustrations, notably Ace's science fiction and Tarzan books. But not too many or too much. The appeal of the pulps depended quite a bit on their covers and line drawings. Dramatic, vivid illustrations. Sort of a cross between comic books and fiction.

DeSoto: Yes, that's right. That is an art that has almost died and I wish that they would revive it. You see, many readers love the stories, but they haven't the imagination to visualize the scenes. To picture it. We learned how to approach a situation so that it was not confusing. And so it has impact. Just like the stories.

Deutsch: What procedures were used in planning a cover?

DeSoto: Well, this is what happened. As a rule they had the stories written. I used to read them to pick up a scene for the cover. Not every story was suitable so I asked the editor to give me a little leeway to change things around. So I used to give my own version of what the story was to be. Then I gave them pencil sketches; maybe one or two, and I'd do the covers from them. In time they were asking their authors to do their stories from my covers! Reversed the procedure.

Deutsch: How did you make the paintings from the sketches?

DeSoto: Well I proceeded to take photographs, I built my own studio and took my own photographs. I posed the models. These things have to be done fast.

1943

I took many many photos and then I laid 'em out on the table and chose the best for the best parts of a few and made a composite. Always had to distort something. For effect or to make room for the titles. I used to arrange for those in my sketch but they didn't always fit. Everything was planned out from the beginning. Once the photo was drawn I used to sketch in my dark tones and from the dark tones work out to the light. I never presented color sketches or let anyone see my photos

All my early works was oils. Then I went to casein. An awful lot of my work was casein. Later work was acrylic. Everything was done for impact "

Deutsch. Who were some other illustrators you admired?

DeSoto. Nick Eggenhoffer was a great dry brush illustrator at Street and Smith when I was just starting. His best work was westerns. I remember a great cover man. Scott. W. Scott. Also Walter Baumhoffer. He did an awful lot of Doc Savage covers. Harries. Bok Harries. Arther Bowker, I remember he did fine work.

Deutsch. What about Virgil Finlay?

DeSoto. Ah, yes. He was a great genius in line work.

We used to call him the Salvador Dali of pulp. Fantastic illustrator, but his cover work wasn't very good. He was a poor colorist.

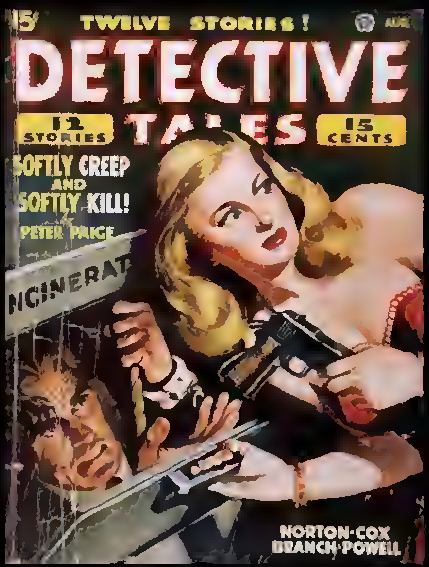
Deutsch: Black Mask was something special?

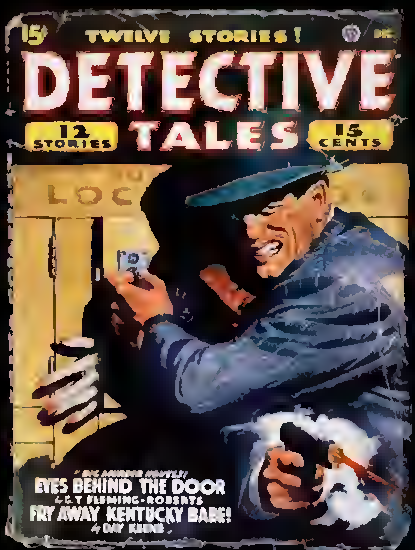
DeSoto: "Ah yes. Of all of them it was the best. I worked very hard to make it distinctive. After awhile I got the dark backgrounds and I worked all close up as I explained to you. Look at the gun on your cover. It looks like a cannon. I went to a place where they made props for the theater and I had them build me a .45, exactly authentic to the last detail, out of wood. And he painted it so you couldn't tell the difference.

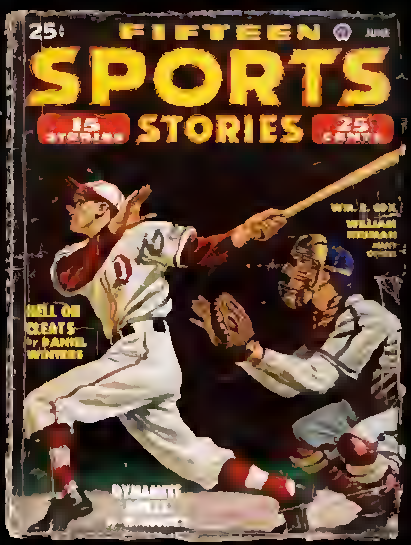
"Due to the shape of the handle, the grip of the hand was different from any other revolver with a .45. And I did sketches of hands holding it in all positions.

And one thing I hated to see was a gun not being held right. It looks like an amateur shooting. If an amateur is going to shoot, he's not a gangster. He's not a criminal. One thing you've got to say about my Black Mask covers. My villains can shoot!"

R de Soto


15¢
TWELVE STORIES!
DETECTIVE
TALES
12 STORIES
15 CENTS
SOFTLY CREEP AND SOFTLY KILL!
PETER PRIGE
NORTON-COX
BRANCH-POWELL


15¢
TWELVE STORIES!
DETECTIVE
TALES
12 STORIES
15 CENTS
EYES BEHIND THE DOOR
FRY AWAY KENTUCKY BABE!


25¢
FIFTEEN
SPORTS
STORIES
15 STORIES
25 CENTS
HELL ON CLEATS
by DANIEL WINTERS
DYNAMITE

NEW
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE
NOW 32 MORE PAGES!
25¢
JULY
BLOOD ON MY DOORSTEP
A NOVEL OF MAINTENANCE TERROR
by JOHN D. MacDONALD
TOWNSLEY ROGERS
BOTTA
MANY OTHERS

Suicide Note, [illegible] lp cover

Signed (as Irene Endris) lower left
In his article The Art and Life of Rafael M. DeSoto for Illustration #10 (June 2008), pulp art historian David Saunders revealed that the prolific artist sometimes used pseudonyms such as "F. Mason" and "M. Francis" on his paintings, and as was the case here, sometimes signed them with "the puzzling name, 'Irene Endris.'"

The Black Mask Magazine

NOW ONLY
15¢
SEPTEMBER
BLACK MASK
A DOC RENNIE STORY BY
C.P. DONNELL, JR.
DALE CLARK
AND OTHERS
CASH AS CASH CAN
A REX SACKLER NOVELETTE
by D. L. CHAMPION
WITHOUT BENEFIT OF CAMERA
by K.M. KNIGHT